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ON PAGE A-1

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American Tells of Long Ordeal in Iran Prisons

By MICHAEL T. KAUFMAN

It was nearly three years ago that Zia Nassry, a United States citizen and New York businessman, was seized from room 805 in the Teheran Hilton Hotel by three armed and masked men.

He said he was blindfolded and interrogated for a day before he was declared guilty of espionage and sabotage and ordered to be shot. His abductors ordered him to write his will, which he did, asking among other things that his papers be given to the Middle East study center at Harvard University.

"With magic marker they put a number on my foot," he recalled recently. "They read a brief statement that they found me guilty. They tied me up on a pole. They opened fire.

"They fired from very close range, maybe three meters," he went on. "I could feel gun powder or the wind of the bullet going past. At first I thought I had been hit. A minute or two later they shouted, 'Bring that so-and-so here.' Then they were nice and gave me cigarettes."

So began an ordeal that was to last 966 days, ending last Nov. 6 when, after a two-hour trial, Mr. Nassry was told he could leave Iran.

According to his account, he had by that time been in seven prisons. Before his release, he said that he was once more put before a firing squad in what again turned out to be a mock execution. He said he was beaten and kept for months in solitary confinement. There are still bruises on his ankles from the metal stirrups from which he said he was once hung upside down.

But now, as the 36-year-old Afghan-born management consultant, whose arrest in his hotel room came four months after the takeover of the United States Embassy in Teheran, described life in Iran's prisons from the living room of his Greenwich Street apartment, he appeared healthy. He was much thinner, however, than when he was known to Western reporters in Pakistan as a spokesman for and liaison with guerrilla groups fighting against the Soviet-backed Afghan Government.

Mr. Nassry was one of three Americans who were arrested and held prisoner in Iran shortly after the seizure of the American Embassy. The other two, Mohi Sobhani, an Iranian-born American citizen from Los Angeles, and Cynthia B. Dwyer of Amherst, N.Y., were both freed

All three were accused of espionage by the regime of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Mr. Sobhani was released after an Iranian court found that the charges against him could not be substantiated. A Teheran court found Mrs. Dwyer guilty of espionage and sentenced her to nine months in prison, but released her immediately because of the time she had already been in custody.

U.S. Cites 'Immense Efforts'

At the time of his release in November, Mr. Nassry said that he had been "a pawn in U.S.-Iranian relations." He said that before his capture he had been a travel agent in Manhattan and that he had gone to Iran to try to meet with officials "on how to help Afghan refugees."

A State Department spokesman said that the United States had expended "immense efforts" of Mr. Nassry's behalf and was very pleased at his release.

Recalling his experiences in unemotional terms, Mr. Nassry unfolded a macabre panorama of seemingly haphazard executions, taking place regularly in the Iranian prison compounds that during his confinement became more and more crowded. He described the torture and killing of prisoners held as religious apostates and he offered a view of Iran's revolutionary turmoil as seen from the bottom of a toppling social pyramid.

Mr. Nassry, who said he came to the United States as a student in 1963 and became a naturalized citizen in 1977, was seized in Teheran on March 11, 1980, as he awaited discussions with Iranian authorities on the plight of Afghan refugees. He said he had made "a colossal error in judgment" by thinking that as a Moslem, a fluent speaker of Persian and an advocate of the Afghan cause he would be secure in Iran's revolutionary turbulence.

Met With Khomeini in 1979

Mr. Nassry, whose father, Nasrulla Khan, once reportedly served King Zahir Shah of Afghanistan as chief of intelligence, had often visited Teheran and in 1979 he met Ayatollah Khomeini in the holy city of Qum. A year later he returned as the head of the Islamic and Nationalist Revolutionary Council of Afghanistan, a group seeking to develop unity between the various guerrilla factions.

He admits having had sympathy for the Iranian revolutionaries, though he explained that one reason he had returned to Teheran was to try to tell officials that the continuing detention of the United States Embassy

He said he also had hoped to raise questions about reports that Soviet tanks were cutting across Khurasan Province in Iran to take up positions at the Shindand Air Base in Afghanistan. Finally he had hoped to cross into western Afghanistan to deliver $25,000 to guerrillas to construct clinics.

He acknowledges that despite his background and his experiences in Afghanistan, he was completely unprepared for the chaos and horror he witnessed from prison after the three masked youths kidnapped him at gunpoint from his hotel room. With the humor he credits for having saved his sanity, he observed that prison had been an excellent place to monitor and study the revolutionary process.

Questioned About C.I.A.

According to his account, he was shunted to many different places and repeatedly interrogated about being an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency. In the early stages he said he was kept by a group called the Joint Committee for Antiterrorists. Later he was sent to the large Evin Prison.

At one point, he said, he was kept chained to a table in the middle of an otherwise empty ballroom in a former palace. He said he spent several months in solitary confinement, at the Komiteh Mushtarak Prison in Teheran and at Lavazon Prison, and at Qizil Hissar, a desert establishment 60 miles from the capital. He was released from Kasser Prison, which was run by the state police and seemed to him the most humane of the institutions.

In October of 1980, he recalled, when he was taken to the old Evin Prison that had been run by the Savak, Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi's secret police, "there were maybe 3,000 prisoners, mostly members of the old cosmopolitan elite, generals, ministers, judges and businessmen as well as members of the Bahai faith.

"After the Iran-Iraq war broke out," Mr. Nassry continued, "the number jumped to 25,000. A new wing was built and prisoners were living in burned-out buses brought to the prison. The newcomers were more ordinary people, younger men. Many were Arabs or Kurds suspected as belonging to a fifth column. They were usually poorer and more vulnerable than the older ones."

Shortly before he was set free, Mr. Nassry said he counted prisoners belonging to 25 different political factions, five of which supported the revolution. All during his detention, he recalled, there was active political discussion and analysis, with factions maintaining